

RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLICY IN INDIA – DOES ASSAM’S NRC THEATEN INDIA’S SECULARITY?

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THE BEGINNING

The time period starting in 1836 and spanning over 37 years, up until 1873, is known as the ‘Dark Age of the Assamese Language’. The reason behind this negative nomenclature is the fact that Bengali largely shadowed Assamese during this period in Assam. During the British reign in India, Bengali was introduced in Assam for the purpose of all official records. It was only natural that with gradual passage of time and the Independence of India in 1947, the Assamese community had come to resent the use of Bangla even in the legal matters of the courts in the state. This led to a series of agitations and riots across Assam which are broadly classified under the umbrella term – the *Axomiya Baxa Andulon* or the Assamese Language Movement.

The language movement in Assam began in the 1960s when the Assamese speaking natives of the state fearing the loss of their cultural identity due to a rise in the numbers of the people who were increasingly becoming a part of the Bangla community. The Assamese believed, and have also written extensively about this ‘discovery’, that their identity was at stake due to silent aggression by Bangladeshi people, both Hindus and Muslims, who entered Assam illegally¹. In 1960, the state’s ‘*Bongal Kheda*’ movement was also at its very peak. This is when a large number of unorganised protestant activities led to widespread property damage, ethnic policing and certain incidences of street violence were experienced in the streets of Assam by the Bengalis. A large number of Bengalis were forced to pick up their lives and move out of the state to ensure safety. Anupa Patangia Kalita’s ‘*Felanee*’ is set with the language movement and the peak of identity politics in Assam as the backdrop. It follows the journey of a woman and how she slowly loses her family to the political unrest in the region.

¹ Ranjan Kumar Padmapati, The Sentinel, Fear of Losing Identity, 7 February, 2020: (accessed on 30th January, 2021) <https://www.sentinelassam.com/editorial/fear-of-losing-identity/?infinitescroll=1>

The Assamese Language Movement further gave way to several other organised agitation activities and protests in the state. If we were to refer to historical evidences and literature that talk about the struggle of the Assamese, Ambikagiri Raichoudhuri eloquently expresses his participation in the *Swadhin Asom* Movement through his poem ‘Mine Is Not a Song of Laughter’.

“My song is an endless heat

Coming out of a hundred burning losses, insults, humiliations;

It is the fiery vapour

Oozing out from the imprisoned energy of the soul

It is the self-denying sentiment

That blows away meanness, cowardice, helplessness;

It is the common seal

That impresses with one form, one colour, one expression

It is the voice of humanity withered

Under a mountain load of insults;

It is the voice of pride incarnate

That condemns the vanity of oppressors”²

In her book, *Assam and India*, Yasmin Saikia extensively writes about how poems written in the early twentieth century “depict the Assamese yearning to be both a part of a larger whole and to affirm a specifically Assamese identity”. The *Swadhin Asom* Movement was built with the aim and idea of finding this identity.

Way before India even thought of documenting the details of its citizens and giving them a legal/illegal status, Assam carried out the first ever exercise of maintaining a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 1951. It must be noted that the demands of the Assamese community weren’t entirely baseless. Assam, being a border state, shares a large part of India’s international border with Bangladesh. There has been an ‘incessant influx’ of mostly Bengali-speaking migrants in Assam since the late nineteenth century. These migrants may threaten to

² Poem taken from: *Assam and India* (Yasmin Saikia), page 5

establish the rule of ‘foreigners’ in many of Assam’s electoral constituencies where they have become a majority, contest for the already scarce employment opportunities available to the real natives of the land and endanger their cultural identity³. Acting on this shared fear of identity loss, an Anti-Foreigners Movement started in the state in 1979 that was led by the All Assam Student Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). This movement was the umbrella under which several protests and political campaigns were organised, that led to large-scale ethnic violence. The Assam Movement (another name for the Anti-Foreigners Movement) ended in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord.

The Government of Assam’s official state portal described the Assam Accord as “*a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed between the representatives of the Government of India and the leaders of the Assam Movement in New Delhi on 15 August 1985*”⁴. There were several clauses of this Accord, however the main ideas were to ‘detect and delete foreigners’. It was also demanded that the names of the ‘foreigners’ are erased from electoral lists, thereby taking away their right to vote. This historic Accord forms the basis of ideas behind the implementation of NRC in Assam and possibly the rest of India.

WHO ARE THE FOREIGNERS?

The Barak Valley region in Assam constitutes of an overwhelmingly large number of Bengalis who form the majority here. There was a Bengali Language Movement here which reached its peak in May 1961 and led to the subsequent killing of 15 Bengalis by the Assamese police. The main cause for this movement was to protest against making Assamese the only official language of Assam regardless of the state’s significantly large (and increasing) Bengali population.

The Foreigners Act of 1946, enacted by the Constitution of India has a seemingly simple definition of a foreigner – any person who is not a citizen of India⁵. However, what the provisions of this Act fail to describe is a definition of this ‘citizen’ and how one can be eligible. In Assam’s context, the natives see the Bengali-speaking community, most of who have migrated from Bangladesh as the foreigners. In 2020, Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee wrote for

³ Samir Kumar Das, *Governing Citizens: NRC and the Question of Migration in India*, Policies and Practices, December 2019

⁴ Government of Assam, Official State Portal of Assam <https://assam.gov.in/en/main/ASSAM%20ACCORD>

⁵ The Foreigners Act, 1946 – Indian Kanoon <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/27376/>

Al Jazeera and painted vivid pictures of his early life as a Bengali in Assam, famously referring to himself as a ‘foreigner’.

“We saw the police enter the principal’s office. That is when I heard the word “curfew” for the first time. Soon after, a boy whispered into my ear: “It’s Assamese versus Bengali.”... “Within a few hours of returning home (much to the relief of my parents and neighbours), I learned about the preamble to this conflict. I was a “foreigner” in Assam, where I had been born: a frightening word meant for all outsiders, even migrants from Bihar state and Darjeeling district (in West Bengal state). It was a political label and a slur.”⁶

A notable number of other Bengali writers, especially from the Barak Valley region have used literature to express their opinions and also share their own experiences. One such striking piece of literature is Moley Kanti Dey’s ‘*Ashraf Ali’s Homeland*’ where a boy called Ashraf Ali constantly changes his home as a result of displacement. Ashraf does not have any sense of belonging or calling a place his homeland as his father had to migrate to India after he was left with no other choice⁷. Every fictional piece of political nature that comes of Assam and is written by the marginalised community has one thing in common – a sense of helplessness and abandonment resonating through the stories of the main protagonists. Bengalis in Assam have long felt unwanted and out of place, yet they yearn to call the state their homeland.

If we were to come to facts, approximately 29% of Assam’s population is comprised of Bengalis according to the Census 2011 data. These statistics make Assam the largest Bengali-speaking state in India, seconded only by West Bengal. The influx of Bengalis from what is present-day Bangladesh to Assam began when India was still undivided and ruled as a British colony, though it is also a fact that it has significantly risen post the Partition of 1947. An article in the New York Times was published in 1983 where several Bangladeshi immigrants spoke about their experiences.

⁶ Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee, We Foreigners: What it feels to be Bengali in India’s Assam, Al Jazeera, 2020 (accessed on 2nd February, 2021) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/2/26/we-foreigners-what-it-means-to-be-bengali-in-indias-assam>

⁷ The Literature of Displacement from Assam’s Barak Valley (accessed on 30th January, 2021) <https://scroll.in/article/832762/the-partition-fiction-very-few-people-read-the-literature-of-displacement-from-assams-barak-valley>

“Survivors of mass attacks on Moslem settlers last Friday by Assamese tribespeople in the Nellie area, 50 miles northeast of Gauhati, said many of their families had been there since the 1940's. That was a time, they said, when a Moslem government was in power in Assam and encouraged immigration, providing the new arrivals land. They said they regarded themselves as Indians. But they said the deeds to the land proving their legitimacy were burned when their villages were set afire last Friday. "We have been born here; we have nowhere else to go," said Abdul Motalib, a 20-year-old farmer from the area, who now lives with other relatives in a crowded refugee camp at Nellie.”⁸

These gaps in defining citizenship and then demanding it to be proven with documents led to the formation of the entirety of the mammoth NRC exercise and the debate surrounding it.

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS (NRC)?

For understanding what the National Register of Citizens is, it is important to grasp the context behind it. The undue pressure from the Assamese leaders who were unwilling to shoulder the influx of migrants from Bangladesh (or what was East Pakistan then) led to the Centre drawing up a proposition for the NRC exclusively for the state of Assam in 1951⁹. When India started its first national Census as an independent state on 9th February, 1951, the then Chief Minister of Assam addressed the enumerators in the state by saying the following.

“You have the proud privilege and unique honour of taking a very important part of collecting the data during the Census operation to enable the Nation to know its problems and prepare a plan for their solution on the basis of such data. I may also tell you that the first National Register of Citizens of the Republic of Bharat will also be prepared from the data collected by you during this Census operation.”¹⁰

The basis of the first NRC exercise which was completed in 20 days was entirely the data collected through independent India's first national Census. In 1980, during the Anti-

⁸ Sanjoy Hazarika, Assam Tragedy: How Bengalis Became the Victims, The New York Times, February 1983 (accessed on 18th February, 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/02/24/world/assam-tragedy-how-bengalis-became-the-victims.html>

⁹ Subir Bhaumik, Samir Purkayastha, Samrat Chaudhury, NRC Factsheet, CRG 2019

¹⁰ Ipshta Chakravarty, Why did Assam prepare the 1951 NRC, which has become a touchstone for citizenship today, Scroll, July 2019 (accessed on 18th February, 2021) <https://scroll.in/article/931879/why-did-assam-prepare-the-1951-nrc-which-has-become-a-touchstone-for-citizenship-today>

Foreigners' Movement in Assam, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) submitted the first memorandum demanding updating of the NRC. After abandoning the exercise thereafter, the Assam Accord was signed on the Independence Day in 1985. The key focus areas of the Assam accord were: a) the foreigners' issue, b) economic development, c) restricting acquisition of immovable property by foreigners, d) prevention encroachment of government lands and e) registration of births and deaths. The main ideas behind these focus areas was to ensure that the political, social and cultural identities of the locals are protected. The heart of the Assam Accord the 5th Clause. This clause deals with the detection of the 'foreigners' in Assam – deletion of their names from the voters' list. The foreigners were classified under three heads for identification and differential treatment under Clause 5 of the Assam Accord. Two dates are of significance in the Assam Accord: 1st of January 1966 and 24th of March 1971. According to the 5th Clause of the Assam Accord, *“All persons who came to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose name appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularised”*. This clause further states that, *“Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and up to 24th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.”* The Assam Accord does not call for their deportation but these 'foreigners' were to get voting rights only after expiry of 10 years from the date of their detection or declaration as foreigner. The rest had to be expelled. Religious persecution was not a consideration for any relaxation in accommodating illegal immigrants.¹¹

Professor (Dr.) Binayak Dutta wrote for the East Wind in 2018, *“The NRC was also viewed in academic and political circles as a fulfilment of the vision of a sanitized Assam that promised to be free of ‘Bongals’*. It was therefore, often misunderstood as a part of the 'mandate of the Assam Accord'. Many academicians working in the Brahmaputra valley thought of it to be a part of the Accord, signed in conclusion of the Assam Movement against 'foreigners'. It is pertinent to remember that the NRC, which today is believed to be extremely critical to the 'national' life of Assam, did not find any mention in the famous Assam Accord signed in 1985. In fact, it was a process that was proposed administratively in 1965 and was politically sanctioned only in 2005, only to be constructed since 2015, after the division bench of the

¹¹ Prabhaskar K Dutta, What is Assam Accord of 1985 and how amended citizenship law challenges it, India Today, December 2019 (accessed on 20th February, 2021) <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/what-is-assam-accord-of-1985-and-how-amended-citizenship-law-challenges-it-1627965-2019-12-13>

Hon'ble Supreme Court passed an order in favour of updating the NRC, 1951, in December 2014."¹²

The process of updating the NRC in Assam has been devised on the basis of 14 documents that one can use to 'prove' citizenship. The basic requirement was that a person had to show their linkage with their ancestors or their existence within the territory of India prior to 25th of March, 1971. The date is extremely important here, because the Bangladesh Liberation War began on 26th March 1971.

According to the official notification, there will be two requirements for inclusion of names of any person in the updated NRC:

- A. The first requirement is the collection of any one of the following documents of List A issued before midnight of 24th March, 1971 where names of self or ancestor appear (to prove residence in Assam, up to midnight of 24th March, 1971) – 1951 NRC or Electoral Rolls up to 24th March, 1971 (midnight) or Land and Tenancy Record or Citizenship Certificate or Permanent Residential Certificate or Refugee Registration Certificate or Passport or LIC Certificate or Any Govt. issued License/ Certificate or Government service/Employment Certificate or Bank/Post Office Accounts or Birth Certificate or Board/University Educational Certificate or Court Records/ Processes. Two other documents - Circle Officer/GP Secretary Certificate in respect of married women migrating after marriage (can be of any year before or after 24th March, 1971) and ration cards issued up to midnight of 24th March, 1971 can be provided as supporting documents. However, they shall be accepted only if accompanied by any of the documents listed above.
- B. The Second requirement arises if the name in any of the documents in List A is not the applicant himself/herself but that of an ancestor - father or mother or grandfather or grandmother or great grandfather or great grandmother (and so on) of the applicant. In such cases, the applicant will have to submit documents as in List B to establish relationship with such ancestor, whose name appears in List A. Such documents shall

¹² Binayak Dutta, The Illusive Indian, East Wind, December 2018, (accessed on 20th February, 2021) <http://eastwindjournal.com/2018/12/11/the-illusive-indian/>

have to be legally acceptable document which clearly proves the relationship. The documents listed in 'List B' are - Birth Certificate or Land Document or Board/University Certificate or Bank/LIC/Post Office Records or Circle Officer/G.P. Secretary's Certificate in case of married women or Electoral Roll or Ration Card.

Provided that any one of the documents of 'List A' of any period up to midnight of 24th March, 1971 shall be enough to prove eligibility for inclusion in updated NRC.¹³

Considering the difficult clauses of the NRC along with the complexity in the system of acquiring and producing the required documents, it was only natural that a large section of the population were at a disadvantage here. Be it the lack of documents required to 'prove citizenship' or just inadequate knowledge among the people of Assam to fathom the plethora of instructions provided to them, the outcome of the mammoth NRC exercise was neither what the state and central governments had anticipated, nor desired.

RESULTS OF THE NRC – HOW DID IT FAIL?

If we were to go by statistics and the scores of news articles available on the results of the NRC with records of how the people were affected by the exercise, one can easily conclude that both the consequences and the experiences were far from satisfactory. When the final version of the NRC was released to the public on the 31st of August 2019, over 19 lakh people in Assam were excluded from the list. Apart from the people who couldn't prove their presence or that of their ancestors' within the Territory of India before 24th March 1971, a large number of declared 'foreigners', 'doubtful voters' and their children have also been excluded.¹⁴ Several minority organisations accused the NRC authorities of rejecting 'genuine documents' of many genuine Indian citizens belonging to religious and linguistic minorities. AASU alleged that both the Centre and the Assam Government failed to check the inclusion of 'many illegal migrants' names' and the exclusion of many 'indigenous applicants'.

Stories of exclusion of indigenous applicants as well as migrants from other States in India are also being used by defenders of the NRC exercise to question the justifications for replacing

¹³ NRC Assam <http://nrcassam.nic.in/faq01.html>

¹⁴ Aman Wadud, Children Out, Parents In: The real challenge begins now that final Assam NRC is here, The Print, August, 2019 (accessed on 22nd February, 2021) <https://theprint.in/opinion/children-out-parents-in-the-real-challenge-begins-now-that-final-assam-nrc-is-here/284862/>

the binary of citizens and non-citizens with those of Hindu and Muslim or indigenous or non-indigenous people while dissecting the exclusion and inclusion figures of the final NRC list.¹⁵

Hundreds and thousands of names that were excluded from the NRC were from within families who have resided in Assam for generations. There have been numerous incidents of parents being included but their children excluded, families being divided and several groups of people losing their identities.

“At the crack of dawn, on September 1, Shehnaz Begum, 27, held her six-year old daughter Soniyara’s hand and trudged along the muddy lanes of Batarbari village in Assam’s Barpeta District.... Born on February 9, 2013, Soniyara is one of thousands of children whose names were not in the final list of the National Register of Citizens published on Saturday, August 31. However, both her father and mother made it to the list.”¹⁶

Soniyara’s story is just one of the millions of examples of similar consequences that resulted from Assam’s NRC exercise. While it is important to understand that no provisions of the NRC, or those of the Assam Accord were focussed at targeting ‘foreigners’ or ‘illegal migrants’ based on their religion, the possibility cannot entirely be ignored either. If the NRC is viewed with the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2020, one can notice similar patterns of exclusion based on religion. Though the government at the Centre refuses to accept the fact that the NRC exercise has fundamentally failed to achieve its target, it is also true that the task of updating the Register has been temporarily halted. The Central Government is also trying to push the NRC agenda with a cut-off date in 1951 instead of 1971 in each of India’s 29 states. Though met with opposition, the leaders have stated that they will ensure the exercise is carried out. But the question still remains – what is the role of religion in the formulation of the NRC provisions in India, and public policies in the broader spectrum of things?

THE HISTORY OF ASSAM’S GOVERNMENT

If we take a brief glance at Assam’s political history, we see that the Indian National Congress dominated the list with maximum tenure in power. However, we can also observe the significant presence of the Assam United Muslim Party during the period when Assam elected

¹⁵ Sushanta Talukdar, National Register of Citizens in Assam: Trauma of Exclusion, The Hindu, October, 2019 (accessed on 24th February, 2021) <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article29498496.ece>

¹⁶ Syeda Ambia Zahan, NRC: The pain and struggle that never ends, The Federal, September 2019 (accessed on 25th February, 2021) <https://thefederal.com/the-eighth-column/nrc-the-pain-and-struggle-that-never-ends/>

'Premiers' instead of Chief Ministers. The Asom Gana Parishad was in power for about 10 years in total after Assam started electing Chief Ministers. It was not until much later, in 2016, that the Bharatiya Janata Party started deciding the course of politics in Assam.

If we were to individually understand what each party's political ideology was and the kind of beliefs they stood for, we would have to initiate with the Assam United Muslim Party. What is interesting here is the strong political motive and beliefs of the leader - Sir Syed Muhammad Saadullah. In fact, it was his ideology that shaped up Assam's population demographics to a large extent, as we see today. The Assam United Muslim Party was formed after an alliance with the Indian National Congress and then the All India Muslim League. However, Saadullah was always a man with a mind of his own. During his tenure as the Premier of Assam, he undertook the state's Land Settlement Policy and the 'line system' which came with it.

Migration has always played a major role in Assam's historical development. Peasants from East Bengal, along with their families, were among some of the first permanent settlers in the region. Several factors that facilitated this settlement included the development of communication lines through railways and steamers between Assam and Bengal (now Bangladesh) through the Barak, Surma and Brahmaputra rivers. There was a rapid increase in Bengal's population during this time. There were also a vast number of cultivable wastelands lying fallow in the Brahmaputra valley. The Bengali cultivators were unable to sustain their families within the small plots of land allotted to them. They thought Assam would provide them better means of improving their lives. This resulted in a steady influx of migrants. At first, the Muslims came alone and then their families moved. The migrated population's dynamics comprised of 85% Muslims. In the Nowgaong district, they consisted of 19% of the population. These peasants were initially determined to conquer all the wastelands however, once they exhausted the same, they moved to forcefully take away the native lands that belonged to the indigenous community in the region. These people were also offering a very high price for the land. This led to the start of protests against the mass immigration. Assam's Line System originated in 1916 in the Nowgaong District through the initiative of local administrative officers to contain the immigration from East Bengal within certain pockets of the state. In view of the increasing number of migrants and in order to avoid conflict between people, as well as to safeguard the interests of the Assamese, the Deputy Commissioners of the district formulated a plan for the segregation of the newcomers by allowing them to settle only

in villages demarcated by a line. The implementation of the Line System paved the way for hostility and rivalry between the immigrants and the local people. ¹⁷

The unambiguous position articulated by both sides arranged as the 'native' and the 'immigrant' was a culmination of a debate, which had brought about a remarkable expansion of the public sphere in Assam from the early twentieth century. Intertwined within this discourse of the 'immigrant and the Line system' were the intricate issues of identity, nation building and Assamese sub-nationalism. The contours of the discourse were significantly shaped by reactions to colonial construct of Assam as a province open to limitless immigration. ¹⁸

If we take a closer look at the various policies that were introduced during this period, we can see how the Muslim League tried to paint the issue with communal colours, thereby further causing unrest between the different parties involved. In 1940, Saadullah convened a conference to formulate a policy known as the 'land development scheme'. Through this scheme, restrictions were imposed on immigrants who had come to Assam after 1st January 1938. This scheme was apparently introduced to satisfy the needs of both the indigenous and the immigrant population. However, this was not the case in practise. The immigrants persisted with their unauthorised conquering of the Assam Valley which, quite inevitably so, did not settle well with the Assamese people. Though Robert Reid overturned Saadullah's decisions in 1942 for a very brief period. He came to power again, later in the same year, and opened grazing forest reserves to the immigrants and grazers. This led to widespread protests and criticism for Saadullah's Ministry. In 1944, Saadullah convened another conference without consulting other senior Muslim League members and passed a resolution to retain the reserved forests intact and locate all wastelands for the settlement of both local people and immigrants, particularly those who settled before 1938. The extremist section of the Muslim League

¹⁷ Akunthita Borthakur and Ritu Thaosen, Rethinking the Line System in Assam and It's Politics, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 73 (2012), pp. 545-552 (accessed on 27th February, 2021)
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44156247>

¹⁸ Rinku Pegu, The Line System and the Birth of a Public Sphere in Assam: Immigrant, Alien, and the Citizen, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress Vol. 65 (2004), pp. 586-596 (accessed on 27th February, 2021)
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44144773>

opposed this decision and demanded the full accommodation of immigrant Muslims, even if this came at a cost of the local society's interests.

The next government that came into power was that of the Indian National Congress (INC). The INC formed Assam's government for the longest period of time. The Congress Government, headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, started its tenure on 11th February 1946. As soon as it came into power, the Government decided to evict the immigrants from the grazing reserves. The Muslim League workers were directed; by a committee under the guidance of Hamid Khan, to protest against the eviction notice of the Congress Government all over the Assam Province. Several resolutions were adopted by the Muslim League Council to launch protests against Bordoloi's Ministry. However, these were all in vain as Bordoloi went ahead with his initial decision. Widespread protests across the region put the Government's plans on halt and prevented its implementation. The Muslim League's continued support for the cause of the immigrants formed a basis of conflict between the League and the Congress.¹⁹

The leaders of the Indian National Congress, especially Gopinath Bordoloi, worked extensively to protect the sovereignty of Assam's identity. He argued that Assam was already a province formed on a linguistic and cultural basis and enjoyed provincial autonomy. He appealed for the separation of Sylhet District (in Bangladesh) from Assam. He also rejected the demand that Assam becomes a part of East Pakistan as preposterous.²⁰ After Independence, Bordoloi continued to work closely with Sardar Patel for the protection of Assam's sovereignty, including its continued separation from China and Bangladesh. He also worked for the rehabilitation of Hindu refugees, who had fled Assam during Partition.

Later, Tarun Gogoi carried forward Bordoloi's ideology as the leader of the Indian National Congress in Assam and the Chief Minister of the state for a total of fifteen years. He has openly condemned the Hindutva ideology but has also emphasised immensely on how "*Hinduism*

¹⁹ Akunthita Borthakur and Ritu Thaosan, Rethinking the Line System in Assam and It's Politics, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol. 73 (2012), pp. 545-552 (accessed on 27th February, 2021) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44156247>

²⁰ Yash Mishra, Gopinath Bordoloi: Saving Assam, a Fight to the Finish, Livemint (accessed on 28th February, 2021) <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/history-daily/2020/02/23/gopinath-bordoloi-saving-assam-a-fight-to-the-finish>

represents India's composite culture by embracing all, irrespective of caste, creed, etc."²¹ Gogoi had once famously tweeted about the Assam NRC being his brain-child. On the other hand, after declaring that most people who were left out were Indian citizens, he slammed it as being a waste paper. On the other hand, a Lok Sabha Congress MP, Abdul Khaleque, called the NRC a 'historic document'.²²

It cannot be denied that Tarun Gogoi played a major role in significantly reducing the number of insurgency activities in the daily lives of the people who in Assam. Though the Congress Government never tried to divide the state along religious lines, their solidarity with the Hindu community was evident regardless.

WHAT COMES NEXT IN ASSAM?

Throughout this paper, one thing that can be observed with absolute certainty, is the Assamese people's continuous demand and fight for a distinctive state and identity, not just in Assam but in the entire territory of India. The promise of a proper National Register of Citizens was hence very appealing to this community. However its failure was equally devastating. That is the reason why the Bharatiya Janta Party's manifesto, for the 2021 elections in Assam, included a promise of 'correction and reconciliation of entries under the Supreme Court-mandated NRC'. However, certain significant protests in Assam when the Citizenship Amendment Act (then Bill) or CAA, cannot be forgotten. The provisions of this Act aimed to fast-track citizenship for six persecuted minority communities – Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians who arrived in India before 1st January 2015 from the Muslim majority countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The BJP's manifesto for 2021 left out any mention of the CAA in Assam, probably because it is a sensitive issue among the natives, who protested widely against it. According to statements by several senior BJP leaders, apparently the CAA is not an issue in Assam. However, we cannot forget that the introduction of the CAA, which was promised by the BJP in the West

²¹ Prasanta Mazumdar, The New Indian Express, 6th August 2020 (accessed on 28th February, 2021) <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/aug/06/hindutva-divides-hinduism-represents-indias-composite-culture-says-congress-veteran-tarun-gogoi-2179980.html>

²² Contradictory Voices in Assam Cong on NRC, The Economic Times, 2nd September 2019 (accessed on 28th February, 2021) <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/contradictory-voices-in-assam-cong-on-nrc-tarun-gogoi-slams-it-as-waste-paper-party-mp-says-historic-document/articleshow/70949302.cms>

Bengal elections, in 2021.²³ The main reason why this Act was heavily rejected by the people of Assam was, yet again, the fear of losing their identity. Granting citizenship, vide the CAA, to Hindus would imply the exhaustion of any means to eliminate Assam's Bengali community.

The real issue at hand now is understanding how BJP's Hindutva ideology will try to harness the pursuit of the Assamese people at establishing a strong cultural identity in India and whether it will really be for their benefit to implement the NRC in Assam. Perhaps, it will be easier to understand what this community really wants when they bring the new government in power in 2021. But, it is still unclear as to what this chosen government will have in store for the common Assamese native and whether India will again be divided on the basis of religion – thus proving the age old saying that history, indeed, repeats itself.

²³ Neelam Pandey, BJP leaves CAA out of its Assam Manifesto, 2 days after promising it in Bengal, The Print, 23rd March 2021, (accessed on 23rd March 2021) <https://theprint.in/politics/bjp-leaves-caa-out-of-its-assam-manifesto-2-days-after-promising-it-in-bengal/626848/>